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Pollution report slams Kennecott over groundwater

National group seeks tighter laws on mining. Utah company says it is working with EPA to correct past problems.

By Lee Davidson

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WASHINGTON — A national environmental group says groundwater pollution by Kennecott in Salt Lake County is a prime example of why Congress needs to adopt better mining laws.

"Years of toxic drainage from waste rock piles contributed to a massive groundwater pollution plume that extends for 70 square miles," the Mineral Policy Center said about Kennecott's Bingham Canyon copper mine.

The problem was highlighted by that group as it released a new report on environmental risks from gold mining titled, "Golden Dreams, Poisoned Streams."

The group is using the report to push for tighter controls on pollution from mining — saying techniques to better control pollution are available but often are not used because they are expensive.

While Bingham Canyon is known to Utahns mostly as a copper mine, the environmental group said it is also the nation's third largest producer of gold — producing 535,000 ounces in 1995 (putting it behind only Nevada's Goldstrike and Gold Quarry mines).

The group said Utah has two other gold mines among the nation's 26 largest: a Mercur mine operated by Barrick Gold Corp. (23rd largest in the nation, producing 101,700 ounces in 1995) and the Barney's Canyon mine operated by Kennecott (26th largest, producing 92,070 ounces).

The group's new study features photos of Kennecott's largest-in-the-world open-pit mine in Bingham Canyon and said the groundwater contamination it caused threatens "the water supply of a Salt Lake City suburb of 70,000 residents" (West Jordan).

It said, "The plume is contaminated with sulfates (from acid mine drainage) and heavy metals.

"After years of foot dragging and unsuccessful court battles aimed at evading responsibility, the Kennecott Copper Co. (current mine operator) has begun taking pollution-control efforts to stop further pollution from entering the groundwater.

"However, to date the company has no plan for cleaning up the existing groundwater pollution, other than to provide alternative water sources to qualified residents," the report said.

Bill Williams, Kennecott's director of health safety and environmental safety, said the group's assertions just aren't true and are founded on incorrect information.

He said, based on a settlement in 1995, the company is cooperating with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state environmental officials to clean up groundwater contamination. The company has installed wells in the aquifer that pump polluted water back to Kennecott where it is recycled. He said the company is also undertaking a study with EPA to determine the larger and long-term effects of the pollution. Specifically, wells that supply West Jordan residents are not fed contaminated water because of the actions of the company.

"The efforts of Kennecott are well above and beyond that which is required," Williams said. "It's difficult to apply today's standards to historic practices. It is always difficult to reverse history."

As he released the study Tuesday, Mineral Policy Center President Philip Hocker said, "Hard rock mining companies are poisoning U.S. water supplies."

He added, "Greedy multinational mining corporations are gouging American soils for minute quantities of gold and leaving behind vast quantities of toxic waste and processing chemicals."

Besides groundwater problems, the study said mining has contaminated 12,000 miles of U.S. streams. And it said pollution may be long term — such as at the abandoned Iron Mountain Mine in California that the report says will leach acid and heavy metals into the Sacramento River for 3,000 years.

It also said that cleaning up the nation's half-million or so abandoned mines imposes a huge cost on taxpayers — which it estimates between \$32 billion and \$72 billion.

The group is calling for Congress to require mining companies to follow the best-available environmental standards — and to pay for environmental damage. It also seeks stronger enforcement measures — including allowing citizen groups to file suit against mining companies that violate environmental requirements.

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